

BOOK REVIEW

Political Drivers of China's Changing Nuclear Policy: Implications for U.S.-China Nuclear Relations and International Security

Tong Zhao

Published by: Carnegie Endowment for
International Peace, pp. 103



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China's rise as an economic and military power hub has generated various responses, each trying to understand and explain the nuclear developments and accretions in the Chinese nuclear arsenal. More than in the economic domain, China's military might now worries scholars in both the global North and South. China has exploited its economic rise to strengthen its military. The most pressing question that policy practitioners, defence analysts and academic scholars are now interested in investigating is the rise of China's nuclear ambitions as the country is known to be increasing its nuclear warhead numbers along with the overall modernisation of its nuclear capabilities. Tong Zhao's latest book, *Political Drivers of China's Changing Nuclear Policy: Implications for U.S.-China Nuclear Relations and International Security*, provides another window into understanding why China is modernising its nuclear arsenal.

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Given the scope of Zhao's subject of inquiry, the book is relatively short. The book has four chapters and an introduction. Its central theme is to provide an alternative understanding of China's nuclear modernisation from the point of view of the political drivers. The author counters conventional wisdom on China's nuclear modernisation. According to Zhao, the conventional rationales, such as the advancement of the US missile defence systems and conventional precision weapons or China's revisionist security agenda, do not fully capture the actual internal dynamics driving China's nuclear expansion. According to him, the primary drivers for the nuclear modernisation or expansion are political considerations within China. He emphasises the need to understand this political undertone to arrive at an adequate explanation, and a clear picture, of China's nuclear modernisation.

To further clarify what is meant by political drivers of nuclear expansion, the author argues that in contemporary China, the political leadership, led by Xi Jinping, has significantly elevated the political importance of nuclear weapons. While not overlooking the technical considerations such as the US homeland missile defence expansion, the author considers political and organisational factors as more central to China's nuclear build-up. While acknowledging the fact that China's supreme leaders since Mao Zedong have emphasised the political role of nuclear weapons, the current President, Xi Jinping, sees nuclear weapons as both status-endowing weapons and instruments that could help to resolve China's broader strategic challenges. The author has investigated authoritative Chinese military publications such as the *Science of Military Strategy* (National Defence University edition) to substantiate his argument about how China views strategic weapons for both military and political purposes.

On the issue of strategic stability with the USA, the author believes that China does not consider this as an accepted term of reference between the US and China. Instead, the Chinese side prefers overall stability to define the bilateral relationship. Because of this perspective, China under Xi sees nuclear weapons as strategic pillars of great power status that make nuclear weapons crucial for the country's strategic position.

Zhao explains how the prevailing power politics mindset has become the reason for China's ambition and insecurity which is feeding its desire for more capable nuclear systems. The author argues that a deepening sense of existential threats and the advancement of a fatalistic concern that a narrowing gap in power will lead to an eventual showdown between China and the US has prompted China to take radical counter-measures, particularly in the nuclear domain. For Xi, there exists an underlying sense of urgency in countering the US perception of the balance of power and addressing the supposed US strategic hostility against China. The author examines factors such as China's domestic decision-making dynamics for their impact on the nuclear policy. He focusses on Xi Jinping's establishment of a highly centralised power system which has created an eco-system wherein the role of technical and policy expertise matters less, particularly when it comes to checks and balances of official policy-making. The downside of this centralised political decision-making, however, is the marginalisation of experts vis-à-vis the military-industrial complex. Zhao argues that such a tendency to cut out the experts has led to incoherence in internal policy-making and greater emphasis on war-fighting capabilities, particularly with the nuclear divisions of the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

Zhao has also explored how the twin logic of political and nuclear stability impacts US-China relations. He has argued that while both countries have always made sure that the use of nuclear weapons should be about the most existential severe military threats, in the past decade, China has begun to focus more on political level threats. To validate his claims, the author explains how Xi's focus on regime security is now a part of the holistic approach to national security. The greater focus on political level threats has made China concerned about the anti-China rhetoric emanating from the Western countries, which, in turn, drives the narrative about nuclear weapons and regime security. According to Zhao, the underlying logic behind this thinking is that the stronger the Chinese nuclear capabilities are, the more conciliatory the US will be about China's rise. A more assertive nuclear China will help stabilise political stability between the US and China.

This logic, however, is lost on the US, which does not understand how an expanded Chinese nuclear arsenal could stabilise the relations.

The author has also examined how information and perception gaps contribute to the underdevelopment of mutual understanding of various issues. The systematic control of information flow from China to the US and the spread of misinformation within the US about the Chinese rise essentially prevent any conciliation. Zhao has listed three challenges that would prevent political stability if followed by a top-down approach. The Chinese policy of political stability, which entails mutual respect for core interests, does not specify what the core interests are and has, in fact, evolved over time for the Chinese. Secondly, it is difficult for a country like the US to fulfil a commitment to respect China's core interests regarding regime security and development rights. Lastly, a reciprocal response from China to the US is still not on the cards from China, which risks the danger of the US conceding to Beijing's revisionist ambitions.

While Zhao understands that the current political environment may not allow the US and China to sit and negotiate, he has made policy recommendations to foster bilateral political and nuclear-focussed stability measures. To mitigate the risk of misinformation and perception gaps, the author has argued that the US and China should first acknowledge that an information gap exists. Such acknowledgement would help both countries take measures to fill the gap and adopt a reassurance strategy. More importantly, China and the US should also explore what the author calls "agreements on principles of behaviour". To do so, Zhao has looked into the Cold War examples of the Helsinki Process of the 1970s and the US-Soviet Union Basic Principles of Relations Agreement of 1972. These examples can help China and the US establish what constitutes both states' working behaviour, paving the way for a *détente* period. Besides bilateral measures, the author has also listed recommendations for the US and China. The author has suggested that the US should be more comprehensively aware of China's internal changes and threat perceptions. Besides this, the US should also minimise ambiguity and inconsistency in its nuclear policy,

particularly regarding damage limitation and counter-force strikes. Zhao has listed various recommendations for China, such as clarifying its legitimate apprehensions and understanding the rival's legitimate concerns. Besides this, the Chinese nuclear policy community, particularly the one linked with the leadership, should engage in a systematic internal analysis to reduce the ambiguity in its external messages. More importantly, Zhao has argued that how nuclear weapons can ensure political stability is something that China has yet to clarify. There is a need from the Chinese side to explicitly illustrate how nuclear weapons stabilise political relations and whether non-military means can also be effective in doing the same task.

This book is a good starting point for understanding the non-military reasons for the Chinese nuclear modernisation. Tong Zhao has done excellent service to the small world of nuclear experts by providing another lens for analysing China and its nuclear strategy. The book presents the argument well and provides sufficient evidence to justify the reasoning. It is a must-read for nuclear experts, policy-makers, and academics who are keen China watchers as also for newcomers to nuclear studies.